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# Supporter of sheriff got a county car

The volunteer deputy received a perk that most full-timers don't have. He might not be the only one.

ROBERT FATURECHI

For months, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Capt. Philip Hansen heard the grumblings: Deep-pocketed donors and other well-connected individuals working as reserve deputies were driving around in unmarked Sheriff's Department cars. One reserve, a restaurant owner who threw a fundraiser for Sheriff Lee Baca, was frequently seen parking a county-owned Ford Crown Victoria outside his La Mirada restaurant, a popular hangout for deputies.

Hansen, who heads the volunteer deputy program, was troubled by the reports and asked for an accounting of which reserves had take-home cars.

He was stunned by the response.

"I basically got nicely told I really wasn't authorized to have that information," Hansen recalled.

It turns out at least one reserve — the Baca fundraiser — was assigned a county car. A sheriff's spokesman conceded that other reserves may have had vehicles as well, but he declined to provide a detailed accounting of how many received such a perk.

Last year, the Sheriff's Department refused to comply with a public records request from The Times regarding take-home county car use and gas consumption by four reserves who have given Baca political support or gifts. The department declined to even confirm the men were reserves, despite all four being named

on department websites or other public listings.

When reached by phone last month, one of the four men, Chris Vovos, refused to answer questions about whether he had a take-home car, hanging up twice. "You're asking me for information I don't give my own father," he said.

Sheriff's spokesman  
[See Sheriff, AA5]



# Supporter of Sheriff Lee Baca got a personal county car

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[Sheriff, from AAI] Steve Whitmore did not confirm that Vovos was assigned a car until The Times presented the department with evidence.

Whitmore declined to say how many reserves had cars, but added that "being a donor to the sheriff has nothing to do with getting a car or not."

After The Times' inquiries, Whitmore said, Baca recalled any county vehicles assigned to reserves and planned to draft a policy to prevent it from happening again.

The department's reserves, who are paid a dollar a year, generally work under the supervision of full-time sworn deputies. Common tasks include administrative work and parking enforcement, though some highly trained volunteers are allowed to make on-duty arrests and work in specialized units.

Hansen and others say they can't imagine under what circumstances reserves would need personally assigned county cars, given that most full-time sheriff's deputies and many

department supervisors don't get the perk.

"There's undoubtedly staff out there who could use a county car, but we can't afford to give it to them," Hansen said, alluding to major cuts in the department's budget in recent years. "I could find you hundreds of them."

Maria Haberfeld, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York who specializes in police ethics and training, said the practice is a questionable use of county funds and could hurt morale.

"I have never seen a department that allocates vehicles to reserves before they take care of their sworn full-time officers. That's unheard of," Haberfeld said. "This is not an operationally sound procedure. On the contrary, this is very bizarre and doesn't sound ethical."

The sheriff's reserve program has for years faced criticism of mismanagement and special treatment. In 2010, a state agency discovered that the program gave badges to volunteers who flunked mandatory law enforcement tests and at-

tended classes at unauthorized locations, including a Four Seasons hotel, 20th Century Fox Studios and possibly a yacht. Among the 99 reserves who were either stripped of their badges or demoted as a result were contributors, businesspeople, at least one celebrity — and Vovos.

In several cases, officials discovered that some course material and attendance records had been fabricated. One trainee apparently passed a firearms test despite missing the target completely.

Hansen said he was brought in about two years ago to clean up the reserves program. After he was contacted multiple times by peers and subordinates who believed reserves were getting their own cars, he said, he felt obligated to act. Car assignments are not up to him, but rather unit commanders across the department.

Hansen said he was worried that cars being personally assigned to influential reserves would be another public embarrassment for a program staffed by more

than 800 volunteers — one of whom, Sherwin Lalezary, was recently lauded as a hero after ending a massive countywide manhunt by arresting an arson suspect accused of setting more than 50 fires.

"I hate to see the very good work of 800 or so like Sherwin be overshadowed by the excesses of very few," Hansen said.

The captain said special treatment within the reserves program has been cleaned up significantly in the last two years. He said big donors still "take liberties sometimes, guys like that kind of walk in whenever they want to meet with execs. Other people need to make an appointment.... That's the kind of thing that irritates a normal person, but that's just life."

Whitmore said Vovos was not using his black Ford Crown Victoria for personal business, but rather to drive around the county six days a week to solicit equipment donations from construction companies for the Sheriff's Department.

"These guys are rich," he said. "They don't need free

cars."

Sheriff's Capt. Patrick Maxwell, who heads the Norwalk station, said he has seen Vovos park a county car for the last two or three years outside his business, a restaurant popular with sheriff's employees. Maxwell said he also has often seen the car parked outside a nearby warehouse that he believes belongs to Vovos.

Maxwell said that on other occasions he has seen Vovos with the car while in

plainclothes, though he said he had no way of knowing if the volunteer deputy was on duty at the time.

A 2008 audit commissioned by the Los Angeles County civil grand jury to look at countywide take-home car use found that the Sheriff's Department did not vet requests for take-home cars thoroughly enough.

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# DETAILS ABOUT DEPUTY PERKS SOUGHT

Molina, backed by other supervisors, presses for more information on sheriff's reserves.

ROBERT FATURECHI  
AND ARI BLOOMKATZ

A Los Angeles County supervisor called on the Sheriff's Department on Tuesday to be more transparent about how taxpayer dollars are being spent within its volunteer reserves program.

Supervisor Gloria Molina's comments came after The Times reported this week that at least one reserve deputy — a fundraiser for Sheriff Lee Baca — had been assigned a county car, a perk most full-time deputies are denied. The department's acknowledgment came after several initial refusals to disclose that information.

A motion introduced by Molina, and approved unanimously, urged the Sheriff's Department to run its reserves program with "integrity and accountability."

Last year, the Sheriff's Department denied an inquiry about cars for reserves by one of its own captains, Phillip Hansen, who heads the reserves division. Hansen said he asked for the information after hearing complaints about deep-pocketed donors in the reserves program getting take-home cars.

Molina said she was disturbed that the department denied information to one of

[See Sheriff, AA4]

# Molina leads effort to get more information about reserve deputies

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[Sheriff, from A41]  
its own managers and said she has been faced with similar stonewalling recently when asking for information about the sheriff's troubled jails.

"I feel for the captain because I feel like I'm in the same boat," Molina said.

The Sheriff's Department also refused to comply with a public records request last year from The Times regarding take-home county car use and gasoline consumption by four reserves who have given Baca political support or gifts.

The department declined to even confirm that the men were reserves, citing "the confidential nature of some assignments." All four, however, are named as sheriff's reserves on department websites or other public listings.

Recently, sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore denied that any reserves were assigned cars. After being presented with conflicting evidence by The Times, he acknowledged that one reserve — Chris Vovos — had a personally assigned county car. He conceded

that other reserves may have had vehicles as well, but he declined to say how many.

After The Times' inquiries, Baca recalled county vehicles assigned to reserves and planned to draft a policy to prevent them from being assigned again, Whitmore said.

The department's reserves, who are paid a dollar a year, generally work under the supervision of full-time deputies. Tasks include administrative work and transporting of evidence, though some volunteers

make on-duty arrests and work in specialized units.

Law enforcement experts said it would be difficult to justify assigning county cars to reserve deputies, given that most full-time sheriff's deputies and many department supervisors don't get that perk.

Whitmore said Vovos was not using his car for personal business but rather to drive around soliciting for equipment donations to the Sheriff's Department.

Baca has faced criticism over the years about using county resources on behalf

of contributors. On at least two occasions, he's launched special investigations in another police agency's jurisdiction on behalf of donors.

In one case, a Beverly Hills lease dispute involving a contributor was assigned "rush" status, generally reserved for homicides and other high-priority cases, and the investigation was referred to internally as a "Sheriff Baca Special Request."

Molina said Baca's granting of privileges to donors who are not entitled to them has troubled her in the past.

Baca could not be reached for comment.

Molina said she expects the Sheriff's Department to report back next week about the reserves program, including training, selection and the use of such resources as county cars. The board has also called on the department to explain why it refused to comply with the public records request from The Times.

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